

National Art Education Association

Symbolic Culture and Art Education

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Source: *Art Education*, Vol. 56, No. 2, Why Not Visual Culture (Mar., 2003), pp. 13-19

Published by: National Art Education Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3194016>

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SYMBOLIC CULTURE



BY DON H. KRUG

"I believe we should examine how complex contextual and symbolic cultural relationships are produced, reproduced, used, and consumed."

Will critically acclaimed works of art disappear with an acceptance of a broader range of art, commercial media, or visual culture? This is not the first time this issue has been raised in art education.

Recently, Duncum's (2002) call for a Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE) approach has some art teachers concerned that if visual culture expands to include the study of commercial media, historically acclaimed works of art will cease to be studied. Mitchell (1995) contends that,

The genius and the masterpiece will not disappear in the context of visual culture but the status, power, and the kind of pleasure they afford beholders will become objects rather than a mantra to be ritually recited in the presence of unquestionable monuments. (p.210)

Here I share some of my teacher education experiences that support the study of symbolic cultural products and practices (visual culture), visible and invisible cultural attributes, and the complexity of contextual conditions.¹ Cultural attributes refer to meanings and values implicit and explicit in particular ways of living (Hall, 1981; Williams, 1958). I begin by differentiating ideas of mass media² from popular culture. Then, historical developments in image technologies are examined through mimetic, intentional, and constructivist representations of "Madonna and Child."³ In conclusion, I discuss cultural attributes that draw on research in cultural studies, including visual culture, media studies, and education (Willis, 1990; Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1981).

and Art Education

Image 1. Originally published in *Vanity Fair* (March, 1998).
Vanity Fair photo of Madonna and Lourdes by Mario Testino, © 1998.

Image 2. Detail: *Virgin and Child* from the John Komnenos and Irene panel is on the World Monuments Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites, a program of the World Monuments Fund. Turkey, Hagia Sophia mosaic (photographer J. Stubbs).
© World Monuments Fund/John Stubbs.



Far right: Image 3. Leonardo da Vinci, *The Litta Madonna*. Tempera on canvas, 42 x 33 cm.
© The St. Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



In-between Spaces of "Popular Culture"

In school and out of school, students are inundated with various forms of commercial media. Advertising infiltrates our everyday lives. Popular culture is the creative practices of peoples' ways of living that lie not in the production of mass media so much as in peoples' daily symbolic use and transformation of consumer goods. Everyday cultural contexts are formed through the transformative and transgressive uses of commodities that market economies provide societies (Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1997).

For example, I recently came across an image of a Madonna and Child depicting the famous pop singer of the same name lying on her back holding her daughter Lourdes. Produced by *Vanity Fair* (March, 1998), a mega-industry magazine with a circulation of millions of people around the world, this digitized image was posted on an individual's personal webpage. The caption read, "Living in a wilderness of mirrors and media glare, Madonna has fun through every image in the pop-culture canon—from rebel to tart, icon, and glamour queen—over the past 15 years ... Listening to the rhythms of Madonna's world and of her extraordinary new CD, *Ray of Light*, ... [she is] a woman on the verge of becoming herself."

Popular culture is how some "things" are preferred and transformed by people through daily ways of living. I think this is what Bhabha (1994) is talking about when he writes, Art. ... creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (p. 7)

Popular culture occupies in-between spaces that constantly move among shifting semiotic boundaries of high and low brow distinctions of aesthetic tastes. Popular culture, visual culture, or "symbolic culture"⁴ as I refer to it in this paper, is a crucial area of investigation for art education. For example, how have image technologies changed the ways that artists, designers, and viewers use historical representation, such as Madonna and Child, as new forms of symbolic culture? In the above advertisement and biography, Madonna and "child" parody art historical information forming an intertextual collage of contemporary meanings. What issues do images such as these produce, and how are their meanings read and interpreted?

Representation and Image Technologies

Mimetic Representation

There are many examples of image production developed before the late 14th century. Manual tools helped create mimetic representations reflecting events in everyday life. For example, Greek and Russian Orthodox religious tile murals provide an example of image technologies used during this extensive time period. In these religious traditions, not only was the placement of figures important, but rules of display controlled the use of line and color. A thin nose and small mouth emphasized a spiritual nature. Iconic images generally depicted a natural or spiritual world, and they were not considered "graven images" even though Greek Orthodox beliefs forbid any semblance of idol worship. Instead, as the 8th-century saint John of Damascus said, religious icons were open books to remind us of God (Allies, 1988).

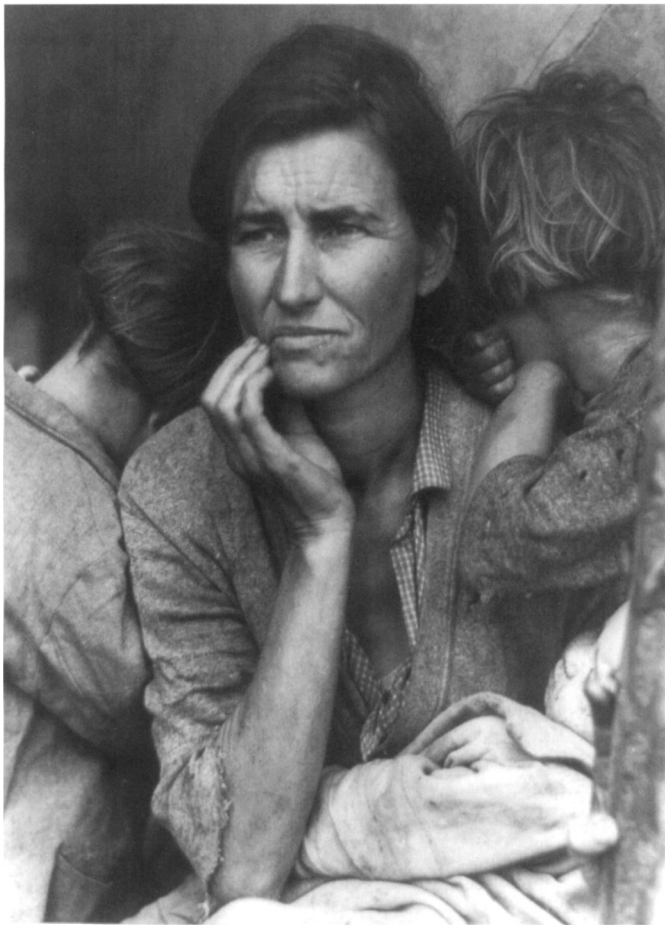


Image 4. Dorothea Lange, American, Nipomo, California, March 1936. "Destitute pea-pickers in California; a 32 year old mother of seven children. February 1936." LC-USZ62-95653 (film copy negative) United States Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.

Website Links:

<http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/past/>

About Life: The Photographs of Dorothea Lange, October 15, 2002-February 9, 2003

http://www.museumca.org/global/art/collections_dorothea_lange.html

Constructivist Representation

In the 20th century, modern advances in industry drove technological changes in the production of images. Skilled laborers were replaced with mechanized work environments. Image technologies included the development of photography in the 1800s, making large-scale reproduction of visual information and its wide distribution possible. Benjamin examined how mechanical reproduction affected the meanings and values of an image and ultimately the role that images played in society (Arendt, 1968). The ability to reproduce copies of photographic reality shifted the importance people placed on the value of "authorship" and "artistic ownership" to that of the distribution and accessibility of information.

A representation of the Madonna and Child as subject is Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, California, 1936, made during the 1930s California migration. Lange's photograph is famous for capturing the emotional despair associated with the Great Depression in the United States. The mother is positioned, by the artist, looking forward to the future as if to suggest the promise of a better life. Even though it references Madonna and Child aesthetic traditions of the past, the photograph "constructs" ideas of complex roles of motherhood specific to the time and contextual conditions of the place in which it was taken.⁵

Image technologies changed greatly after the 1960s and have since extended into the present with developments of microprocessors, computers, digital imaging, and virtual space. In the 1980s and 1990s, electronic media radically transformed the meanings of images in societies around the globe. Postmodern contexts of accessibility and the free flow of information provided conditions necessary for world trade economics. "Photographic truth" was openly questioned and debated during the 20th century as digital images, the Internet, and virtual environments, challenged viewers to modify their understanding of representation and reproduction on this perspective. The value of a digital image is derived from its ability to inform and be easily accessed, manipulated, stored, and shared through electronic devices. Therefore, producing a unique image makes very little sense with electronic media.

Ideas about representation continue to evolve as image-makers reuse cultural icons through parody and iconic transformations. For example, Benetton's advertisement of a

Intentional Representation

Sometime during the mid-15th to the 18th centuries, perspective systems introduced different ways of representing and understanding physical existence, which, in turn, influenced developments of philosophical attitudes toward science and the arts established in Western societies. Berger (1972) wrote, "Every drawing or painting that used perspective proposed to the spectator that he [she] was the unique center of the world" (p. 18). Perspective systems organized space as linear "reality" instead of abstract knowledge. Descartes further refined human perception to mathematical mapping of visual matter. This rationalistic approach to viewing and thinking about real life was based on legitimizing ideas of empirical evidence.

Intentional representations portrayed images imbued with broadly accepted inherent meanings and aesthetic values. Authenticity was a crucial way in which images were perceived as unique and valuable. Later, Benjamin wrote that art and images acquired a sacred aura that made them authentic (Benjamin, 1968). These meanings were understood as natural and not socially constructed. For example, Leonardo da Vinci painted several versions of the "Madonna and Child" (*Madonna Litta*) between 1452-1519. Art historians have speculated that this image represented universal concepts of maternal emotion, an essential bond between a mother and her offspring (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001).



Image 5. Horace Bristol, American, 1938. *Nursing Mother in Camp*, near Visalia, Tulare County, California. Gelatin silver print, 13 x 10 in. © Horace Bristol/COBIS/MAGMA.

Black woman nursing a White child juxtaposes racial difference, as represented through skin-tone, evoking a broad range of positive and negative interpretations. One possible reading sees the woman holding the child not as the child's mother, but as a caregiver. Thus, this image constructs simultaneously ideas of "idealized interracial mother and child relationships" and the "use of black women as 'wet-nurses' to breastfeed the white children of their owners during the history of slavery in the United States" (Sturken and Cartwright 2001, p. 40). Contemporary image-makers reuse the contextual values of historical meanings by intertextually weaving ideas at issue. Through these transformations, the reading of information (visual, audio, and gestural) has become increasingly complex and dynamic.

Complexity of Studying Culture

Studying the contextual complexity of culture is not a passive act of consumption as suggested by mass media theories (Schiller, 1973). "To interpret images is to examine the assumptions that we and others bring to them, and decode the visual language that they speak" (Sturken and Cartwright 2001, p. 41). Symbolic culture is entangled in a complex web of meanings and values that include aspects of language, cultural and socio-historical references, processes of sense perceptions and cognition, and a politics of display. By viewing, analyzing, interpreting, and transforming symbolic culture, we influence the meanings, values, and uses assigned to it that fill our day-to-day lives.

Culture is sometimes referred to as a specific lifestyle (microculture) and as a national identity (macroculture)

(Banks & McGee Banks, 1997). Physical materials are also called culture. Thus, culture is everything and everywhere. Cultural relativism is a crisis of interpretation, when language becomes excessively meaning "full" and value "full" to the point of being meaningless and valueless. If everything is culture, culture becomes an empty signifier, sliding among interpretations, meaning everything and nothing simultaneously. I believe the contextual conditions of culture should be continually (re)articulated within the field of art education.

Culture is one of the most complex words in human language (Williams, 1977). Signifying language systems are used to ascribe meanings and values to particular words within the contexts of signifying practices. Meanings and values are mediated through human perceptions, memories, physiological processes, and the development of languages (Ong, 1982). Language is the most obvious form of cultural representation because it is a socially constructed practice of human lived experiences (Hall, 1997). An analysis of culture should seek to clarify the meanings and values implicit and explicit in particular ways of living (Hall, 1981; Williams, 1961). To understand culture is to identify, analyze, and interpret this web of relationships among the social circulation of meanings, values, and pleasures associated with the things people make and their particular ways of living (Fiske, 1989). Additionally, culture is continually in transition, remaking social relations through specific alliances, negotiations, and struggles (Clifford, 1988).

The complexity of cultural study can be overwhelming. Meanings and values are circulated through social, cultural, historical, political, and economic contexts. These contextual conditions are also influenced by physical, semantic, spiritual, and social forces (Alland, 1995) of human socially interested agency (Archer, 1988). Additionally, social category systems such as ability, age, ethnicity, gender, race, social status, sexuality, etc. affect our understanding of cultures contextual complexity. It is no wonder that teachers and students seek ways to simplify or ignore this tangled web of meanings and values. Still, studying symbolic culture should encompass the rich diversity of contextual conditions to be educationally significant.

For several years now, I have been teaching inquiry⁶ methods for examining the complexity of cultural contexts through art education to undergraduate and graduate students. We begin with Bullivant's (1997) statement that "people belong to, live in, or are members of social groups; they are not members of culture" (p.30). Anthropological and sociological studies indicate that everyone has a sense of "peoplehood" or ethnicity as defined through social category systems of language (San Juan, 1992). People have a specific family genealogy and are members of particular social formations (Omi & Winant, 1994). All humanly produced material objects are ethnic and multicultural in that through their production they come to represent both visible and invisible symbolic meanings and values of diverse human populations.

After years of debate, one recognized difference between multicultural and non-multicultural distinctions of symbolic

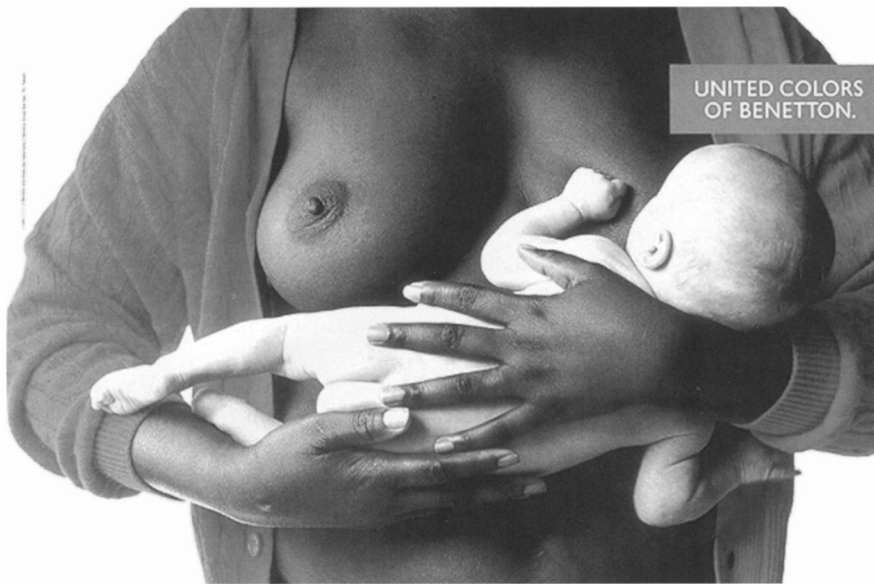


Image 6. *Breast Feeding*,
Benetton Communication.
Concept: O. Toscani.
Courtesy of The United Colors of Benetton.

culture or art is that conservative theories of differences tend not to recognize the validity of conflict across that difference (Fiske, 1989; Krug, 1992/1993). Differences are characterized in terms of aesthetic quality. Conservative interpretations tend to evaluate artwork along high brow and low brow tastes defined through artistic disciplines (Smith, 1981; Bersson, 1981). In other words, disciplinary criteria direct our attention to accomplished artists who produce acceptable artwork for study (Becker, 1982; Danto, 1981). Art judgments are based on assumptions that artwork can fit within norms established as aesthetic conventions of taste (Berger, 1972; Bourdieu, 1984).

The study of material products called art has become too isolated and restricted from life experiences (Chalmers, 1981; Krug, 1992/93). Conservative views redefine social differences as only cultural differences. For example the inverting of social and cultural differences can be seen in the marketing of crayons as “multicultural” and tourist products (e.g. “Appalachian” baskets, “African American” face-jugs, and “First Nation” blankets) being sold as ethnic or multicultural artifacts. This process diverts attention away from contextual conditions that are socially and historically produced. Cultural differences are circulated in societies through a rhetoric of distance, materially and semiotically as part of a “special kind of material practice” (Williams, 1977, p.165) and as the “uniqueness” of art. Through signifying practices of representation, people learn to value particular distinctions of taste, some of which separate groups of people along material, economic, political, and social contexts (Fiske, 1989). Objects can represent issues of social and cultural hybridity and difference among various groups of people. These issues are important areas for studying the complexities of culture. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991).

Visible and Invisible Attributes of Culture

Teachers and students should consider that representations are socially constructed as they investigate visible/tangible and invisible/intangible cultural attributes. Critical inquiry of cultural attributes can be helpful for identifying, interpreting, and analyzing contextual complexity. A study of these conditions can reveal how representations (signifying practices and products) ascribe and circulate meanings, values, and pleasures about symbolic culture.

Bullivant (1997) identified three popular meanings of visible attributes of culture. First, culture has been associated with high and low distinctions of taste regarding dance, music, drama, and the visual arts. Ballet and opera are considered to represent high culture, whereas, break-dancing and rock n’ roll are thought of as low-brow art forms in some societies. Second, small-scale social groups and alliances, i.e., adolescent, athlete, drug, hippie, motorcycle, scholar, etc., are commonly called subcultures. Third, the term *culture* is often used confusingly with large-scale social groups of people or societies (e.g. African, First Nation, Japanese, etc.). These commonly accepted definitions offered by Bullivant illustrate that conceptions of culture are typically misunderstood as either groups of people or as connected to tangible material things.

Critical inquiry should be premised on constructivist representational theories and practices that have demonstrated that artifacts, artwork, or things are not necessarily meaningful (Hall, 1997; Lanier, 1976, 1987). Any analysis of cultural attributes should include more than an examination of an object’s visible symbol system, style, and form. While these are important characteristics, teachers and students should seek a fuller investigation into the interpretation of life-centered issues associated with the things people make (Krug, 2002).

Research about cultural attributes is extensive in education (Banks & McGee Banks, 1997), and, of course, any list is always subject to revision. Nevertheless, the following cultural attributes have been helpful for teacher education and professional development students when conducting inquiry about the contextual conditions of symbolic culture.

- Members of a particular group share culture. A social group (e.g., community, regional, or national level) is not a culture (Bullivant, 1997).
- Culture is dynamic (Gollnick and Chinn, 1986). Change and continuity are expressed through many forms: ideational, symbolic, and interpretive (McFee, 1980; Neperud, 1995).
- Culture is learned through enculturation—living it, and through socialization—formalized instruction (Stuhr, 1994).
- Culture is adaptive to changes through social, semantic, spiritual, and physical environments (Alland, 1995).
- Culture is represented materially and semiotically through a person's interests, satisfactions, practices, and values (Krug, 1998; 1992/93).

Visible and invisible attributes of culture can be used to study symbolic cultural production through art education. Studying cultural attributes reveal relationships about the formation of a person's self and social identity within diverse ways of living (Williams, 1961; Hall, 1997). For example, why was Luciano Benetton interested in advertising his clothing line through a narrative photographic genre of social commentary? Benetton's press releases assert that its "communications" (not advertisement) strategies were "born of the company's wish to produce images of global concern for its global customers." The ads are "not only a means of communication but an expression of our time." Their corporate identity "The United Colors of Benetton" is routinely placed in a small green box along the side of the page.

What forms of satisfaction or dissatisfaction are produced from the circulation of these ads? Public reactions to Benetton's communications have varied widely, from empowering to tasteless. The juxtaposition of a clothing company and intense moral issues may seem hypocritical and shameless to some. Conversely, the Benetton communications (ads/art) can be seen as a crusading effort to promote social values.

How were these images produced and circulated in different societies? Benetton's photographer Oliviero Toscani has been recognized with many awards for his compositions of controversial images executed with exceptional technical skill. There is no question that Benetton understands the concept of self-promotion. The print and poster campaigns generated an incredible amount of discussion, an effective no-cost form of advertising.

What values have been associated with these particular images? Benetton has produced numerous controversial advertising images since 1984, such as: a black horse mounting a white one; the naked buttocks of an AIDS carrier, tattooed with "HIV Positive;" a priest and a nun in a sensual

kiss; an empty electric chair; and children under the age of 12 involved in unjust labor practices.

However, Benetton also supports social organizations with print campaigns that discuss moral issues around the world. Their home page has a large collection of news stories on such topics as whale hunting, ozone layer depletion, land mines, and North Korean girls being sold into marriage. (<http://www.benetton.com/www/aboutyou/campinfo/index.html>) Such an analysis of visible/tangible and invisible/intangible attributes of symbolic culture can provide a way to textually identify and examine the complexity of these contextual conditions.

Conclusion

I have suggested studying symbolic culture by examining the complexity of cultural attributes within specific contextual conditions. Contextual conditions influence, and are influenced by human sensory perceptions, language systems, and attributes of culture. I have described how meanings and values of symbolic culture can be examined by selecting a specific contextual condition (e.g., image technologies) and examining mimetic, intentional, and constructivist representations (e.g., Madonna and Child).

Over the last 8 years, I have taught about invisible and visible cultural attributes, contextual conditions, and social category systems such as age, ability, gender, education, ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality, and social status. I believe we should examine how complex contextual and symbolic cultural relationships are produced, reproduced, used, and consumed. Studying the complexity of symbolic cultural production can be achieved by using critical inquiry that looks carefully at the contextual conditions of in-between spaces of popular culture comprised of acclaimed works of art and commercial media.

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FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Contextual conditions include social, historical, economic, political, technological homogeneous and heterogeneous forces of power at play in societies.
- ² Fiske (1989) writes, "Mass media is a term used by those who believe that the cultural commodities produced and distributed by the industries can be imposed upon the people in a way that irons out social differences and produces a unified culture for a passive, alienated mass audience. Such a process, if it existed, and it does not, would be anticultural and antipopular; it would be the antithesis of culture as the production and circulation of meanings and pleasures, and of the popular as an intransigent, oppositional, scandalous set of forces." (p.177)
- ³ I selected the subject of Madonna and Child because of its long history of representation in Western societies and its contemporary appropriation in publications.
- ⁴ I use the term *symbolic culture* because I believe that it clearly addresses studying both visual and nonvisual aspects (ideational, beliefs, interests, values) of culture.
- ⁵ Bristol said, "When this photograph was taken, both Steinbeck and I felt it represented a Madonna figure, with the newborn baby at its mother's swelling breasts, a faint suggestion of proud fatherhood in the background legs and hand." He later titled this picture *Rose of Sharon* after Steinbeck's fictitious character.
- ⁶ In this article, *critical inquiry* means the processes of understanding the complexity of phenomena, examining possible meanings and structures of contextual conditions, and dealing with multiple interpretations. Simply, to inquire is to direct one's immediate thoughts and actions about an idea, issue, or problem so as to increase one's understanding of a particular solution or body of knowledge. Critical inquiry is a continual process of identifying and posing problems, asking questions and questioning the validity of the questions asked. It entails the selection of processes that are relevant to studying ideas and issues to solve a problem. There are multiple processes of inquiry.